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ABSTRACT

This summative report highlights findings of a survey into the everyday information needs of New England residents related to occupational and non-occupational situations in which they made decisions, sought answers, or clarified or solved problems. Data from the survey provide insights into the behavior of information seekers, information sources consulted, perceived level of user satisfaction with information sources, institutional and environmental barriers to effective information seeking, and reasons for use and non-use of libraries. (FM)

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CITIZEN INFORMATION SEEKING PATTERNS:

A NEW ENGLAND STUDY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY REPORT

For

THE WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE ON LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES

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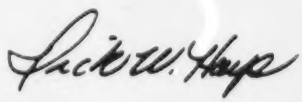
FOREWORD

This document speaks to the role of libraries in satisfying the informational, recreational, occupational and educational desires of our citizens. Many persons and agencies are participating in the projects of which this summary report is a first word provided for the White House Conference.

State librarians, community librarians, school librarians, academic librarians, college students, and researchers are helping, but most important of all is the direct involvement of the citizens of the six New England states. It is they who ultimately will shape the future of library and information services and whose support it must possess. The Office of Libraries and Learning Resources is pleased to join the School of Library Science of Simmons College in this venture into the future of knowledge.



DICK W. HAYS
Associate Commissioner
Office of Libraries and Learning Resources
Office of Education

INTRODUCTION

This report, sponsored by the U.S. Office of Education, Office of Libraries and Learning Resources, highlights findings of a survey into the everyday information needs of New England residents. These information needs relate to occupational and non-occupational situations in which residents made decisions, sought answers, or clarified or solved problems. As a result of this probing of individuals' situations, the data from this survey provide insights into the behavior of information seekers (e.g., their source awareness and problem articulation), source providers consulted, perceived level of satisfaction with information source providers, institutional and environmental barriers to effective information seeking, and reasons for use and non-use of libraries.

The six New England states vary greatly in terms of residential situs (urban/rural), socio-economic status (age, education, and income), and availability of information sources (interpersonal, institutional, and mass media). By providing insights into a variety of information situations information-seeking strategies, and barriers encountered in the search for information, a study of New England has relevance for other parts of the United States.

This study is the first to examine information needs of adult citizens (16 years and older) on a regional or multi-state scale. It places library use, for the region as a whole, in the context of specific situations and details a range of other sources consulted in the search for information.

During the months from July to October 1979, individuals from 2,400 households in New England, 400 per state to simplify cross-state comparisons, submitted to telephone interviews averaging fifteen minutes. These interviews probed both work and non-work situations and asked about problems needing solutions that individuals had encountered in the past month or so. Households were selected on the basis of a computer-generated, random sample of New England telephone numbers. Comparison with demographic data compiled by the U.S. Bureau of the Census for the region suggests that those interviewed were representative of demographic characteristics for individual states and for the region. The 2,400 New England residents interviewed fall into the following categories:

Sex		Ethnic	
Female	55.4%	White	93.8%
Male	44.6%	Black	1.7%
		American Indian	1.2%
		Portugese	0.9%
		Hispanic	0.6%
		Asian American	0.2%
		Other	1.6%

For the purpose of analysis, data were analyzed on the basis of frequency distributions and percentages as well as tests for significance of relationships between variables. Specific questions were examined on the basis of the following demographics: sex, age, geographic location (urban/rural), education, occupation, income, and ethnic background. This summary report highlights significant findings of this investigation, detailed analysis of which will be presented in the forthcoming report.

In summary, it is the belief of the researchers that the base-line data generated from this regional study will be useful to White House Conference delegates and others in understanding a variety of citizens' recent everyday information needs.

CURRENT SITUATIONS FOR WHICH INFORMATION WAS NEEDED

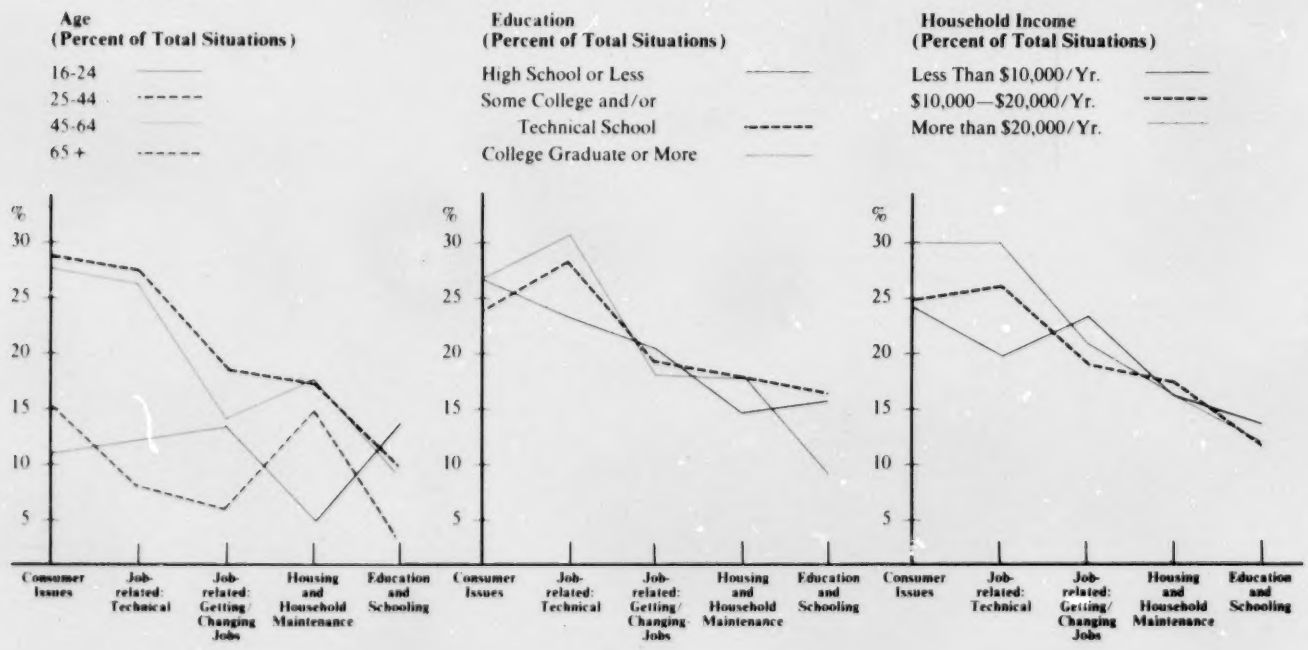
During the interviews, respondents were requested, first of all, to explain recent situations from the past month or so in which they sought information. The 2,400 completed interviews resulted in 3,548 situations, both of a work and non-work nature. Further insight into the situations was important to understand the context in which respondents turned to information source providers.

Following is a rank order of major situation categories faced by the people surveyed. The greatest number of situations related to consumer issues. Both occupational and non-occupational needs are reflected in all categories.

Situation	Number	Percent of Total Situations
Consumer Issues	476	13
Job-related: Technical[1]	470	13
Job-related: Getting/Changing Jobs	355	10
Housing and Household Maintenance	291	8
Education and Schooling	242	7
Money Matters	185	5
Recreation	178	5
Job-related: Organizational Relations[2]	176	5
Health	154	4
Job-related: Salary and Benefits	126	4
Child Care	103	3
Personal Relations	102	3
Energy	65	2
Transportation	60	2
Assorted Miscellaneous and Other	565	16
TOTAL	3,548	100

[1] Issues related to execution of specific tasks or related to setting up businesses.
[2] Job definition and relations with supervisors and co-workers.

The five most frequently mentioned situations are further explored in relation to three selected demographic characteristics—age, education, and household income of the respondents. The following graphs show substantial differences in terms of information-seeking patterns among different groups of individuals.



WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE THEMES

Another way to view information needs is within the context of the five themes specified for the White House Conference. The 3,548 situations were reexamined on the basis of these themes. Data generated for the study dealt with all themes except "Increasing International Understanding and Cooperation."

Some 73 percent of the information needs detailed by respondents related to the theme of "Meeting Personal Needs." The only other theme to generate wide interest was that of "Improving Organizations and the Professions." Twenty percent responded to this theme.

Themes		Number of Situations	Percent of Total Situations
I.	**Meeting Personal Needs**		
a)	serve in solving day-to-day problems	1,839	52
b)	assist individuals in coping with trauma or crisis	172	5
c)	inform the public of news and current events	106	3
d)	support interests in cultural heritage, religion, and family life	195	5
e)	accomodate needs in entertainment, recreation, and leisure activities	210	6
f)	serve special constituencies	23	1
g)	other (personal)	26	1
II.	**Enhancing Lifelong Learning**		
a)	support education in schools	71	2
b)	concerns reinforcing higher education	78	2
c)	erase illiteracy and improve reading skills of the general public	2	0*
d)	enhance informal lifelong learning for pre-school age children and adults	17	0*
e)	other	18	0*
III.	**Improving Organizations and the Professions**		
a)	serve organizations that provide products or services	458	13
b)	support organizations that provide a benefit	10	0*
c)	assist professions	169	5
d)	other	68	2
IV.	**Effectively Governing Society**		
a)	increase citizen participation in public policy decisions	38	1
b)	government needs for census, economic, weather, and other related information	6	0*
c)	government needs related to public service, research, regulations and laws	36	1
	TOTAL	3,548	100%

* Percentages smaller than 0.55 are rounded off.

Since "solving day-to-day problems" alone accounted for over 50 percent of the respondents' situations, it is of interest to note that 53 percent of the respondents to this goal had a high school education or less, were under 34 years of age, but were members of households with incomes of $15,000 and more.

SOURCES USED IN INFORMATION SEEKING

Respondents were given a list of source providers and asked to select those which they used, or were in the process of consulting, to resolve their information need. To ensure validity of responses, the list was randomized and presented in a prescribed manner.

The sources consulted are shown below in the order of frequency given by the 2,400 respondents. Also given are the frequencies with which respondents regarded those sources used as the most and least helpful. Libraries were listed ninth in order of information source providers consulted. Libraries were considered as most helpful in 15 percent of the situations in which they were mentioned as a source of information. They were regarded as least helpful in 14 percent and in the remaining 71 percent, they were an intermediary step in the information chain.

Sources Consulted	Number of Situations	Percent of Total Situations	Percent by Which Source is Listed as: Most Helpful	Least Helpful
Your own experience	2,573	74	25	16
Something a friend, neighbor, or relative told you	1,968	57	15	17
Something you read in a newspaper, magazine, or book	1,554	45	10	12
Something you learned from someone who works for a store, company, or business	1,553	45	10	10
Something you learned from a co-worker	1,509	43	12	11
Something told you by a professional such as a doctor or lawyer	1,398	40	13	6
Something you learned from someone who works in government	934	27	5	6
Something you saw or heard on TV or radio	717	21	1	8
Something you got from a library	580	17	3	3
Something you found in the telephone book	575	16	1	6
Something you learned from someone who works for a social service agency or charity	454	13	2	3
Something you learned from a religious leader	330	10	1	1
Other	164	5	2	0

The above sources of information were further grouped into broader categories: interpersonal (own experience, friend, neighbor, relative, or co-worker), institutional (professional, school, religious, library, social service or charity, or governmental), mass media (newspaper, television, magazine, books, or radio), and other. The following summarizes the percent of situations in which source categories were cited as most and least helpful by respondents.

Source Categories	Most Helpful	Least Helpful
Interpersonal	52%	44%
Institutional	35%	29%
Mass Media	11%	26%
Unclassified	2%	1%

LIBRARY USE AND NON-USE

Respondents were asked to specify the reasons why they used a library for the work and non-work situations specified. Some 87 percent of those using libraries did so based on their perceptions that libraries held materials relevant to the resolution of their problems.

New England residents were most likely to draw upon interpersonal sources of information. Among those institutional sources consulted, libraries ranked fourth. Businesses, professionals, and government agencies were suggested more frequently than were libraries; social service agencies and religious leaders were consulted less frequently. Libraries were most often used as a source of information in situations dealing with consumer issues; job-related: technical and getting/changing jobs; and education and schooling. Libraries were mentioned at least once in all of the remaining situation categories of neighborhood issues, transportation, public assistance, and crime and safety.

As indicated on page 6, libraries were among those sources of information consulted in only 17 percent of the total situations described. For those situations in which libraries were not given as an information source consulted, survey respondents were queried as to the major reasons. Their responses are given in the following table. Some 50 percent felt that either their situations did not require library use or the materials and services offered by libraries were in some way inadequate to the resolution of their information need. It might be noted that 11 percent maintained that they already had enough information and that access to libraries would only result in an information overload.

Reasons for Non-Use	Number of Situations	Percent of Library Non-Use Situations
Don't need libraries	766	26
Didn't think libraries could help	418	14
Had enough information from other sources	315	11
Didn't occur to me	288	10
No reason given	238	8
In the past, I could not find what I want/need; assume same would be true in this instance	207	7
Lack of time	164	6
Libraries don't own what I need/want	100	3
Inconvenient location	91	3
Library holdings are not current enough	68	2
Assorted miscellaneous and other	282	10

The final report of this project will be available by the summer of 1980 and can be requested at cost of production by writing to the *Principal Investigator* and *Project Director*.

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